

To be like Lee Everett: Self-deprivation of agency in *The Walking Dead* and *Red Dead Redemption II*

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For some time now, the media has witnessed a noticeable surge of interest in antiheroes, i.e., characters embodying traits of both villains and classic heroes. Although their actions are often unethical, antiheroes are also capable of behaving properly and nobly. Morally ambivalent protagonists frequently appear in popular TV series and films (*The Sopranos*, *Drive*, *Game of Thrones*), as well as in video games (*The Witcher 3*, *The Last of Us*, *GTA IV*). Many researchers (including Margrethe Bruun Vaage, Carl Plantinga, and Malcolm Turvey) have attempted to determine what makes the figure of the morally ambiguous hero so appealing to consumers of mass entertainment.

Although antiheroes can also be found in video games, so far, they have received little attention in game studies. Even so, the role of morally ambiguous characters in games is just as important as in other media, especially regarding issues of identification or attachment to characters in games. Although it is not my intention here to focus exclusively on the representation of antiheroes in digital entertainment, they will be an important part of this discussion.

In this paper, I want to describe a phenomenon I call the self-deprivation of player agency. It refers to a situation in which a player attributes greater autonomy to the in-game character they control, while still having direct influence over their behavior and character, as illustrated by two game characters: Lee Everett from *The Walking Dead* and Arthur Morgan from *Red Dead Redemption II*. These characters are listed online, in forums, on social media, and on websites dedicated to digital games, as two of the most prominent protagonists in the history of digital games.

Lee Everett and Arthur Morgan are appreciated not only for the way they were written, designed, and portrayed. Both characters owe their popularity to their personalities. Although Lee and Arthur have committed many immoral acts, positive opinions about them prevail among players. Lee's fans often appreciate his patience and protectiveness, while Arthur is praised for his capacity for self-reflection and strong sense of honor. While the perception of both of these antiheroes as overly virtuous by the majority of the gaming community is an interesting phenomenon, I would like to draw attention to another issue. In both cases, Lee and Arthur do not have to display any positive traits. The protagonist of *The Walking Dead* can be a rude egoist, and Arthur - a ruthless gangster. Given that it is up to the player to determine how these characters behave, the question arises: why do so many of us, as players, readily attribute our own choices to the avatars we control?

I will attempt to answer this question by drawing on game theory, such as the distinction between the avatar and the player, proposed by Rune Klevjer. An avatar that is entirely dependent on us will not make us forget our agency. On the other hand, a player character possessing a modicum of autonomy may give the impression that it could be independent of us. I will also discuss the theory of the player as a fictional proxy, which explains when we can consider our hero's actions to be our own and when - that character's. Next, I intend to propose an explanation for why self-deprivation of agency does not occur in every game that relies on player choices, pointing to the similarity between video games and movies.

The definition of agency (and its self-deprivation)

Before discussing the main issues, I would like to define the term "agency." In her book *Videogames and Agency*, Bettina Bódi rightly notes that any attempt at defining agency in games risks creating a highly limited understanding of such a broad and ambiguous concept¹. However, since discussing all aspects of agency would be counterproductive and would significantly divert from the main purpose of my article, I would like to outline the framework within which I will examine this concept. Let us assume, for the purposes of this text, that agency manifests itself through the player's significant actions in a given game. These are actions or choices that directly impact the course of the game, the environment, or the fate of characters in the game world. Agency should therefore not be understood merely as the game's immediate reaction to the player's action (interactivity), but also as the player's significant influence on the plot or the world depicted in a given video game.

¹ Bettina Bódi, *Videogames and Agency* (London, New York: Routledge, 2022), 22, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003298786>.

Having discussed how I will approach the concept of agency, I would like to reiterate my definition of self-deprivation and demonstrate how this phenomenon occurs. I define the self-deprivation of agency as the phenomenon in which a player attributes greater autonomy and independence to their avatar than the character actually possesses.

Consider the following example:

- Player A in game world X decides to help other non-player characters. They also generally choose dialogue options that make their avatar act friendly toward others.
 - Player A's account is as follows: "Most of the time, I'm nice to other [characters] and try to help everyone."
 - Player A acknowledges their agency in the game and considers the actions of the avatar they control to be their own.
- In the second case, Player B, while playing game Y, makes decisions and dialogue choices in a manner similar to Player A. Thus, thanks to their choices, Player B's avatar is shaped into a likable and helpful character.
 - Player B's account, however, goes like this: "Lee is very helpful and able to support anyone."
 - There is a diminishment of the [player's] agency here. Player B attributes greater autonomy and independence to their avatar.

It is precisely these kinds of comments about Arthur Morgan and Lee Everett (as in Example 2) that can be found on online forums, blogs, and in video essays on YouTube. To understand better and explain this phenomenon, we must first discuss what factors influence players' perceptions of avatars and how those perceptions change.

Me or him? The perception of avatars and player characters

The very perception of an avatar or other characters in a game as a separate entity is neither new nor surprising. There are many theories, as well as empirical studies, that focus on how a player perceives their avatar. It is generally believed that the image of the avatar in the player's eyes is not fixed and constantly changes depending on the situation. This means that during gameplay, a player may sometimes regard their avatar's actions as their own and refer to the controlled character as "I." At other times, the player may distance themselves from their avatar and its actions, referring to it as "he."

There are many reasons why players so often change their perception of their characters and actions in the game. In the article "Me and Lee: Identification and the Play of Attraction in "The Walking Dead,"" Nicholas Taylor et al. suggest that a player's identification with their avatar

(or lack thereof) may be influenced by factors such as internalized social norms, familiarity with the medium, or the player's physicality². This means that a player may project their own morality onto their avatar to justify a choice made in the game. In another instance, a player might explain their avatar's behavior—for example, by describing it as typical of a war game protagonist—if the player character seeks to resolve every conflict through the use of weapons.

Felix Schröter reached similar conclusions when developing various models of how players experience characters in games ("modes of experience"³). According to Schröter, the way we perceive a character in a game depends largely on how that character is presented. A character defined primarily by its technical aspects (utility in the game, mechanics, and statistics) will tend to be perceived as an element of the game. In contrast, a character that expresses its motivations or personality traits will be perceived as a fictional entity that is part of the game's fictional world. Schröter points out that the way in which a character behaves at any given moment determines how the player perceives it⁴. When, during gameplay, the player sees guards walking from place to place, they will likely view them as an element of the game—an obstacle to be overcome. In contrast, an avatar that makes a surprised face during a cutscene in reaction to what it has seen will most likely be perceived as a fictional entity.

The utility and sense of belonging to the game's fictional world seem just as important when it comes to the distinction between the avatar and the player-character, as proposed by Klevjer. According to the researcher, the avatar is a tool entirely dependent on the player; all of its goals and motivations are assigned directly by the player. Avatars thus serve as an extension of the player's agency and experiences. The player character, on the other hand, shares certain traits with the avatar but also possesses a degree of independence. The player character's personality, motivations, or beliefs need not, therefore, be imposed by the person controlling them⁵.

Klevjer's theory is well illustrated by the differences between the main characters in the games *Skyrim* and *The Witcher 3*. In the former case, a Bethesda studio game, we are dealing with an avatar. In *Skyrim*, we can freely create the character we will control; we choose our avatar's name, race, gender, and appearance. Additionally, our character in *Skyrim* will never express an opinion or behave in a way that contradicts or conflicts with the player's preferences or decisions.

Geralt of Rivia, the protagonist of *The Witcher 3*, is an example of Klevjer's player character; his personality and motivations are, to a certain extent, predefined and entirely independent of the player. In certain situations, Geralt will comment on an event, an element of the environment, or the weather without the player's intervention. Some of the witcher's behaviors will also not be influenced by the player—when near hostile characters, Geralt will automatically draw his sword.

² Nicholas Taylor, Chris Kampe, Kristina Bell, „Me and Lee: Identification and the Play of Attraction in The Walking Dead”, *Game Studies* 1 (2015): 8, <https://gamestudies.org/1501/articles/taylor>.

³ Felix Schröter, „My Avatar and Me. Toward a Cognitive Theory of Video Game Characters”, in: *Video Games and the Mind: Essays on Cognition, Affect and Emotion*, ed. by Bernard Perron, Felix Schröter (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016), 38–39, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/11237687>.

⁴ Schröter, 41.

⁵ Rune Klevjer, *What Is the Avatar? Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-Based Singleplayer Computer Games*, Revised and commented edition (Bielefeld: transcript, 2022), 69–70, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=3411591>.

Klevjer's distinction between the avatar and the player character explains why some characters in games may seem more independent than others. It should be emphasized that for a player to be willing to diminish their agency, they must first recognize that their avatar is sufficiently autonomous. Autonomy should be understood here as the character's behaviors and actions that cannot be directly attributed to the player. The theory of the player character as a fictional proxy, developed by Logan Taylor and Matthew Carlson, attempts to determine which of the avatar's actions can be attributed to the player.

According to Taylor and Carlson, the theory of the player character as a fictional proxy explains why players speak of their character's actions as if they were their own. The fictional proxy operates as follows: pressing the X button on the controller causes the player character to fire a weapon. By pressing the X button, the player authorizes their in-game character to fire the weapon on their behalf within the game world. Thus, the player's statement, "I fired the weapon," is true⁶.

Taylor and Carlson, however, point out that while the player character may act on the player's behalf in the fictional game world, it will not always represent that person. This is because the player can only be held responsible for the actions and decisions they have authorized their avatar to make. Thus, by losing complete control over the character during a non-interactive cutscene, the player is not responsible for their avatar's actions and decisions⁷.

It is worth noting that the player character can still display signs of independence while acting on behalf of the one who controls them/plays them. If the game briefly describes an action or a dialogue option to choose from (e.g., "say something nice" or "be rude"), the way in which these are carried out will not be up to us. In *Red Dead Redemption II*, for example, I can decide that Arthur Morgan, the character I control, should be nice to someone, but neither the way he shows his kindness nor what he says is under my control. So, by selecting the "greet" option, I can expect my avatar to greet someone or pay them a sophisticated compliment. Such gestures and behaviors can, in turn, deepen the impression of my character's autonomy.

I have already discussed game theory that explains the effect of players' self-deprivation of agency. In the next section, I will discuss game developers' techniques employed to foster this phenomenon, using *The Walking Dead* and *Red Dead Redemption II* as examples.

Games as a Cinematic Experience

Digital games have long drawn on many tools developed by filmmaking. One of the most common forms of storytelling in games is cutscenes, typically scripted scenes generated by the game engine. There are also games such as *Heavy Rain* and *Until Dawn* that attempt to blur the conventional boundary between games and film. They contain gameplay elements while striving to maintain a sense of cinematic continuity, for example, through the use of quick

⁶ Matthew Carlson, Logan Taylor, „Me and My Avatar: Player-Character as Fictional Proxy”, *Journal of the Philosophy of Games* 1 (2019): 5, <https://doi.org/10.5617/jpg.6230>.

⁷ Carlson, Taylor, 11.

time events. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska suggest that the marriage of digital games and film is often a necessary technique for creating the unique experience of gaming⁸. *The Walking Dead* and *Red Dead Redemption II* are perfect examples of this.

Both games clearly attempt to evoke feelings typically associated with film and television. This goes beyond the typical use of audiovisual tools such as camera movement, soundtracks, or lighting. These titles also draw heavily on the aesthetics and conventions of the films or TV series they reference.

Red Dead Redemption II is a game set in late-19th century US, when civilization had reached nearly every corner of the country, bringing the era of lawlessness to an inevitable end. The game's protagonist, Arthur Morgan, is a member of one of the last gangs, led by the charismatic Dutch Van Der Linde. Morgan, an aging gangster, tries to find his place in this new reality, but realizes that the Wild West he once knew is irrevocably fading into the past. The game draws on genre tropes familiar from Westerns. During gameplay, the player traverses the American prairies, participates in gunfights, and robs banks. The plot is developed mainly through cinematic cutscenes; every mission, even the smallest one, begins with a cinematic scene that sets the stage for the story. Furthermore, the game often transitions seamlessly from gameplay to film (for example, during main missions when the player performs a monotonous task, such as riding a horse from point A to point B). At a certain point, the camera pulls away from the protagonist, film strips appear on the screen, music begins to play, and the player can watch Arthur Morgan galloping across the prairie.

Of course, such techniques in themselves will not make the player feel like they are watching a movie. *Red Dead Redemption II* is an open-world game, so you can spend hours exploring its vast landscapes, fighting rival gangs, hunting, or fishing. However, it is important to remember that Arthur Morgan will primarily function as the player's fictional avatar. This means that we can get to know Arthur's character and goals better only while completing missions and watching cutscenes, which in turn can lead to developing affection for the character.

In contrast, Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead*, like many of the studio's other titles, is designed to resemble a TV series. Its plot is divided into episodes, each of which has its own preview, summary, and is concluded with end credits. Additionally, each of the four parts of *The Walking Dead* game series is referred to as a season. The full title of the part under consideration here is *The Walking Dead Season 1*.

The first season tells the story of a small group of people trying to survive a zombie apocalypse that has engulfed the entire world. The group of survivors is led by the game's protagonist, Lee Everett, who is also caring for an orphaned girl named Clementine. The gameplay revolves around making difficult, often morally ambiguous decisions and choosing various dialogue options for the protagonist under time pressure. The time limit here is not merely a game mechanic; it is also intended to create a sense of continuity, as if the characters were conversing in a movie.

⁸ Screenplay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces, ed. Geoff King, Tanya Krzywinska (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 149.

The defining feature of a movie is, above all, a lack of interactivity. When watching a movie, the viewer does not influence the characters' behavior and fates, unlike in games, where the player's actions can often determine the ending of the entire story. The titles mentioned above, despite using narrative techniques or strategies drawn from film, still offer the player the opportunity to make decisions that influence the course of the plot and the game's world.

What's more, the fact that a game resembles a movie does not necessarily mean that the player loses their sense of agency. Following the example of the *Uncharted* series with its "active cinematic experience"⁹, Bódi convincingly demonstrates that the use of cinematic language as one of the game's main elements does not have to limit the player's activity. On the contrary: it can offer active participation in events strongly reminiscent of scenes seen in movies¹⁰. This does not mean, however, that making games more cinematic means the characters' apparent independence. Ultimately, it is not about whether the player actually has control over their character, but about what they feel when playing as these characters.

Feelings and Reality

Another cinematic phenomenon that contributes to the self-deprivation of agency is what Margrethe Bruun Vaage calls the exploitation of our tendency toward low-level automatic responses¹¹.

It needs to be pointed out that the self-deprivation of agency among players considered here concerns two antiheroes, i.e., morally ambiguous characters. This means that within the gaming community, Lee Everett and Arthur Morgan are generally regarded as positive characters, even though they do not always exhibit commendable behavior. It is also true that although the player influences which traits these avatars will exhibit, it is precisely thanks to Klevjer's distinction between the avatar and the player character that we can determine why not every character will elicit such fondness from the player. Because the protagonists of *Red Dead Redemption II* and *The Walking Dead* possess predefined character traits and behaviors, it is easier to regard them as independent entities. This is different for characters I have created in *Baldur's Gate III* or *Skyrim*, where every aspect of their behavior depends solely on me.

In her book *The Antihero in American Television*, Vaage devotes considerable attention to discussing the narrative strategies employed by modern TV series. These techniques aim to persuade viewers to warm up to the ruthless gangsters and serial killers appearing on screen. One of the most effective ways for an antihero to win the viewer's or player's affection is to exploit the human tendency to rely on low-level responses. As Vaage argues, when watching a film, just as in real life, the human mind would need too much time to assess a situation rationally, so it often takes shortcuts and relies on strong emotions rather than facts when evaluating that situation¹². Consequently, when we see an antihero who, despite his flaws and

⁹ Bódi, 75.

¹⁰ Bódi, 108–109.

¹¹ Margrethe Bruun Vaage, *The Antihero in American Television*, Routledge Advances in Television Studies (London, New York: Routledge, 2017), 11–12.

¹² Vaage, 11–12.

moral failings, behaves decently (helps a stranger, cares for his family), it is easy for us to like him and turn a blind eye to his criminal activities and other morally reprehensible acts. It is even easier for us to sympathize with such a character if he stands out against the backdrop of characters who are more depraved than him¹³.

Digital games are no exception here. What is more, a similar mechanism can be observed when making “good” and “bad” choices in a game. This means that during gameplay, we will notice the environment’s positive or negative reactions to our avatar’s actions. Consequently, we will focus less on the fact that we triggered that reaction by controlling our character. If we decide to help someone as a character, it is most likely the character who will be praised for the good deed, not us as players. The praise or disapproval of the environment in response to our hero’s action will most likely cause us to forget our own agency. Of course, the condition is that the character we control must show initiative in the process.

Red Dead Redemption II serves as a good example of the above-described phenomenon. During the game, the player can take honorable or dishonorable actions, which in turn affect the player’s honor rating. Depending on whether Arthur’s honor is high or low, other characters will either treat him with respect and greet him on the street or, on the other hand, show him clear disapproval. Additionally, both the ending and the cutscenes that depict the protagonist’s moral transformation or decline will differ based on the honor rating he earns.

This principle is well illustrated by a scene that takes place after completing one of the main missions in the game’s third act. Arthur, who is dying of tuberculosis, may meet at the train station either a nun he knows (if the player has completed side missions involving her) or a priest who has decided to leave the Van Der Linde gang. Morgan’s encounter with the nun will only be possible if his honor rating is high enough. In this moving scene, Arthur confesses to the nun about his violent life and reveals that he contracted tuberculosis after beating up a sick farmer who owed money to the gang. The cutscene shows the transformation the main character has undergone and how deeply he regrets the life he has led. Although it was the sum of our “honorable” actions as players controlling Arthur that led to this turn of events, it is easy to forget that at a moment like this. The game’s cinematic aesthetic, as well as our tendency to react with minimal cognitive effort, certainly contribute to this.

The Walking Dead is a similar case. It is easy to forget that before the player-controlled Lee Everett became the leader of a group of survivors (and a surrogate father to little Clementine), he had been convicted of murdering his wife and was about to go to prison. The game’s creators very skillfully encourage us to judge Lee based on emotion rather than reason. This is evident in the opening scene of the first episode, when Lee is being transported to prison in a police car. The protagonist is portrayed not as a heartless murderer, but as a repentant man struggling with the weight of his guilt. Furthermore, the officer transporting Lee admits that many convicts in similar situations have insisted they were innocent (even though they were caught red-handed). Such narrative devices are intended to persuade the player to treat the protagonist more leniently.

¹³Vaage, 97.

Although players largely determine how Lee will interact with other characters or Clementine herself, it is easy to attribute many positive traits to him, such as a willingness to help, good-naturedness, and protectiveness. This is because Lee puts his own spin on our dialogue choices. Even though I am the one who decides what he should say and do on my behalf, he will execute my decisions in a manner of his choosing. If I want Lee to greet someone, he will use a warm voice and kind words when greeting that character. Consequently, when I want Lee to be kind and helpful, he plays the role of a caring guardian and a leader who looks out for others. Combined with the other characters' positive reactions to the good-natured Lee and the film's aesthetic, this creates the impression that these are his innate features.

Moreover, the storyline, which features the main character taking care of an orphaned girl helps us view him as a character worthy of our praise. As Vaage points out, displaying traits desired by society, such as caring for one's family, makes this type of protagonist earn our respect, especially if he serves as a counterpoint to a character who does not embody such traits¹⁴.

Summary

In this text, I have described a phenomenon I have termed "self-deprivation of player agency." It manifests when a player attributes greater autonomy to their character than the character actually possesses. This phenomenon can be observed in the way players speak about their characters' personalities and actions, even though they were largely responsible for their avatars' decisions and behaviors. As examples, I have cited the immense popularity of Arthur Morgan (*Red Dead Redemption II*) and Lee Everett (*The Walking Dead*). To explain why a similar effect does not occur in every choice-based game, I described how the player's perception of the avatar influences their sense of agency. The more the character we control appears to depend on our choices, the more we will consider their actions to be our own, based on the distinction between the avatar and the player character proposed by Klevjer. Additionally, I have discussed how certain game theory concepts, such as the idea of the player character as a fictional proxy, define when we can consider our avatars' actions to be our own and when we cannot. This translates into perceiving our avatar as more autonomous than it actually is within the game world. Likewise, the likening of games to film (framing, the emphasis on using certain shots in cutscenes) helps create the illusion that our avatars are, to some extent, independent of us. Furthermore, our tendency toward automatic cognitive responses contributes to a sense of self-deprivation of agency when we focus on our immediate reaction to our character's actions.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

¹⁴Vaage, 40.

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ABSTRACT:

Online forums and social media platforms reveal gamers' fascination with antiheroes, especially with Lee Everett (*The Walking Dead*) and Arthur Morgan (*Red Dead Redemption II*). It is worth noting that these characters are often praised both for their positive character traits and the moral stance they represent. However, the player's influence on the actions and ethics of these characters is often overlooked. The player's ability to make choices in games means that the values Arthur Morgan and Lee Everett will uphold depend primarily on the decisions the player makes. In this text, I describe this phenomenon, which I have termed "player-induced self-deprivation of agency." In order to determine the conditions for this effect, I discuss research on how players may perceive their characters and how the perception of an avatar can translate into a sense of agency in the game. Furthermore, using the examples of *The Walking Dead* and *Red Dead Redemption II*, I demonstrate how the use of cinematic language in storytelling within digital games can reinforce the impression that the character we control is independent of us.

Red Dead Redemption II

GAMING AS A CINEMATIC
EXPERIENCE

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Michał Mydla – b. 2000, holds a master's degree in English from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Silesia and is a game studies scholar. His primary area of interest is the relationship between the player and the avatar, as well as the mechanisms that induce feelings of shame and guilt in the player.